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Bit of Green.—Frontispiece.



"I was more at ease now, and read my best." p. 26.

A BIT OF GREEN:

OR, THE STORY OF

LAME WILLIAM AND HIS MUSK PLANT.

"Thus we need therefore to call to mind the more heavy sufferings of Christ, that so thou mayest the easier bear thy own light and burden."—*The Imitation of Christ.*

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"I was born at New York, and died at New York."

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A BIT OF GREEN.

CHAPTER I.

CHILDREN who live always with grass and flowers at their feet, and a clear sky overhead, can have no real idea of the charm that country sights and sounds have for those whose home is in a dirty, busy, manufacturing town. Just such a town, in fact, as I lived in when I was a boy, which is more than twenty years ago.

My father was a doctor, with a very large practice, though not among the richest people; and we lived in a comfortable house in a broad street. I was born and brought up there; and ever since I can remember, the last sound that soothed my ears at night, and the first to which I awoke in the morning, was the

constant rumbling and rattling of the carts and carriages as they passed over the rough stones. I never noticed if I heard them in the day-time; but at night my chief amusement, as I lay in bed, was to guess, by the sound of the wheels, what sort of vehicle was passing.

“That light, sharp rattle is a cab,” I thought. “What a noise it makes, and gone in a moment! One gentleman inside, I should think. There’s an omnibus; and there, jolty-jolt goes a light cart. That’s a carriage, by the way the horses step; and now, rumbling heavily in the distance, and coming slowly nearer, and heavier, and louder—this can be nothing but a brewer’s dray!” And the dray came so slowly, that I was asleep before it had got entirely out of hearing.

Ours was a very noisy street, but the noise made the night cheerful; and so did the neighbouring church clock, which struck the quarters; and so did the light

of the street lamps, which came through the blind and fell upon my little bed. We had very little light, except gas-light and daylight, in our street; the sunshine seldom found its way to us; and when it did, people were so little used to it that they pulled down the blinds for fear it should hurt the carpets. In the room my sister and I called our nursery, however, we always welcomed it with blinds rolled up to the very top; and as we had no carpet, no damage was done.

But sunshine outside will not always make sunshine within; and I remember one day when, though our nursery was unusually cheerful, and though the windows were reflected in square patches of sunlight on the floor, I stood in the very midst of the brightness, grumbling and kicking at my sister's chair, with a face as black as a thunder-cloud. The reason of my ill-temper was this:—Ever since I could remember, my father had been ac-

customed, once a year, to take us all into the country for change of air. Once he had taken us to the sea; but generally we went to an old farm-house in the middle of the beautiful moors which lay not many miles from our dirty black town. But this year, on this very sunshiny morning, he had announced at breakfast that he could not let us go to what we called our moor-home. He had even added insult to injury by expressing his thankfulness that we were all in good health, and so the change was not a matter of necessity.

I was too indignant to speak, and rushed up stairs into the nursery, where my little sister had also taken refuge. She was always very gentle and obedient (provokingly so, I thought!) and now she sat rocking her doll on her knee in silent sorrow, whilst I stood kicking her chair, and grumbling in a tone which it was well the doll could not hear, or rocking would have been of little use.

I took pleasure in trying to make her as angry as myself. I reminded her how lovely the purple moors were looking at that moment; how sweet heather smelt, and how good bilberries tasted. I said I thought it was "very hard." It wasn't as if we were always paying visits, as many children did to their country relations; we had only one treat in the year, and father wanted to take that away. Not a soul in the town, I said, would be as unfortunate as we were. The children next door would go somewhere, of course. So would the little Smiths, and the Browns, and *everybody*. Everybody else went to the sea in the autumn; we were contented with the moors, and he wouldn't even let us go there. And at the end of every burst of complaint, I discharged a volley of kicks at the leg of the chair, and wound up with, "I don't see why he can't!"

"I don't see either," said my sister timidly, "but he said something about

not affording it, and spending money, and about trade being bad, and he was afraid there would be great distress in the town."

O these illogical women! I was furious. "What on earth has that to do with us?" I shouted at her. "Father's a doctor; loss of trade won't hurt him. But you are so silly, Minnie, I can't talk to you. I only know it's very hard. Fancy staying a whole year boxed up in this beastly town! And I had so worked myself up, that I fully believed in the truth of the sentence with which I concluded—
"There never was anything so miserable."

CHAPTER II.

MINNIE said nothing, for my feelings just then were something like those of the dogs who (as Dr. Watts tells us)

“delight
To bark and bite;”

and perhaps she was afraid of being bitten. At any rate, she held her tongue; and just then my father came into the room.

The door was open, and he must have heard my last speech as he came along the passage; but he made no remark upon it, and only said, “Would any young man here like to go with me to see a patient?”

I went willingly, for I was both tired and half ashamed of teasing Minnie; and we were soon in the street. It was a broad and cheerful street, as I said; but before long we left it for a narrower one, and then turned off from that into a side street, where the footpath would only allow us to

walk in single file—a dirty dark lane, where surely the sun never did shine.

“What a horrid place!” I said. “I never was here before. Why don’t they pull such a street down?”

“What is to become of the people who live in it?” said my father calmly.

“Let them live in one of the bigger streets,” I said; “it would be much more comfortable.”

“Very likely,” he said; “but they would have to pay much more for their houses; and if they haven’t the money to pay with, what’s to be done?”

I could not say; for, like older social reformers than myself, I felt more sure that the reform was needed, than how to accomplish it. But before I could decide upon what to do with the dirty little street, we had come to a place so very much worse that it put the other quite out of my head. There is a mournful fatality about the pretty names which are

given, as if in mockery, to the most wretched of the by-streets in large towns. The street we had left was called Rosemary street, and this was Primrose place.

Primrose place was more like a yard than a street. The houses were all irregular and of different ages; on one side was a gap with palings around it, where building was going on; and beyond stood a huge black factory. But the condition of Primrose place was beyond description. I had never seen anything like it before, and kept as close to my father as was consistent with boyish dignity. The path was broken up, children squalled at the doors, and quarrelled in the street, which was strewn all over with rags, and bones, and bits of old iron, and shoes, and the tops of turnips. I do not think there was a whole unbroken window in all the row of tall, miserable houses; and the wet clothes hanging out on lines stretched

across the street, flapped above our heads. I counted three cripples as we went up Primrose place. My father stopped to speak to several people, and I heard many complaints of the bad state of trade to which my sister had alluded. He gave some money to one woman, and spoke kindly to all; but he hurried me on as fast as he could, and we turned at last into one of the houses.

My ill-humor had by this time almost worked itself off in the fresh air, and the novel scenes through which we had come; and for the present, the morning's disappointment was forgotten, as I followed my father through the crowded miserable rooms, and climbed up staircase after staircase, till we reached the top of the house, and stumbled through a latched door into the garret. After so much groping in the dark, the light dazzled me, and I thought at first that the room was empty. But at last a faint "Good day" from the

corner near the window drew my eyes that way; and there, stretched on a sort of bed, and supported by a chair at his back, lay the patient we had come to see.

CHAPTER III.

HE was a young man about twenty-six years old, in the last stage of that terrible disease so fatally common in our country—he was dying of consumption. There was no mistaking the flushed cheek, the painfully laborious breathing, and the incessant cough, while two old crutches in the corner spoke of another affliction—he was a cripple! His gaunt face lighted up with a glow of pleasure when my father came in, who seated himself at once on the end of the bed, and began to talk to him, whilst I looked around the room. There was absolutely nothing in it, except the bed on which the sick man lay, the chair that supported him, and a small three-legged table. The low roof was terribly out of repair, and the window was patched with the fragment of a newspaper, but through the glass panes that

were left, in full glory streamed the sun, and in the midst of the blaze stood a plant in full bloom. The soft yellow flowers looked so grand, and smelt so sweet, that I was lost in admiration, till I found the sick man's black eyes fixed on mine.

"You're looking at my bit of green, Master?" he said in a gratified tone.

"Do you like flowers?" I inquired, coming reluctantly up to the bed.

"Do I like 'em?" he exclaimed in a low voice. "Ay, I love 'em well enough—well enough," and he looked fondly at the plant, "though it's long since I saw any but these."

"You have not been in the country for a long time?" I inquired compassionately. I felt sad to think that he had perhaps lain there for months, without a taste of fresh air or a run in the field; but I was *not* prepared for his answer—

"I never was in the country, young gentleman."

I looked at my father.

"Yes," he said, in answer to my glance, "it is quite true. William was born here. He got hurt when a boy, and has been lame ever since. For some years he has been entirely confined to the house. He was never out of town, and never saw a green field."

Never out of town! Confined to the house for years! And what a house! The tears rushed to my eyes, and I felt that angry heartache which the sight of suffering produces in those who are too young to be insensible to it, and too ignorant of God's providence to submit with "quietness and confidence" to His will.

"My son can hardly believe it, William."

"It is such a shame," I said; "it is horrible. I am very sorry for you."

The black eyes turned kindly upon

me, and the sick man said, "Thank you heartily, sir. You mean very kindly. I used to say the same sort of things myself, when I was younger and knew no better. I used to think it was very hard, and that no one was so miserable as I was. But I know now how much better off I am than most folks, and how many things I have to be thankful for."

I looked around the room, and began involuntarily to count the furniture—one, two, three. The "many things," were certainly not chairs and table.

But he was gazing before him, and went on: "I often think how thankful I ought to be to die in peace, and have a quiet room to myself. There was a girl in a consumption in the room below me; and she used to sit and cough, while her father and mother quarreled so that I could hear them through the floor. I used to send her half of anything nice I had, until I found they took it. "I did

wish then," he added with a sudden flush, "that I'd been a strong man."

"How shocking!" I said.

"Yes," he answered; "it was that first set me thinking how many mercies I had. And then there came such a good parson to St. John's, and he taught me many things; and then I knew your father: and the neighbours have been very kind. And while I could work I got good wages, and laid by a bit; and I've sold a few things, and there'll be these to sell when I'm gone; and so I've got what will keep me while I do live, and pay for my coffin. What can a man want more?"

What, indeed! My unsatisfied heart, make answer!

A fit of coughing that shook the crazy room interrupted him here. When he had recovered himself, he turned to my father.

"Ay, ay, I have many mercies, as you know, sir. Who would have thought I

could have kept a bit of green like that plant of mine in a place like this? But, you see, they pulled down those old houses opposite, just before I got it, and now the sun couldn't come into a king's room better than it comes into mine. I was always afraid, year after year, that they would build it up, and my bit of green would die; and they are building now, but it will last my time. Indeed, indeed, I've had much to be thanked for. Not," he added in a low reverential tone, "not to mention greater blessings. The presence of the LORD! The presence of the LORD!"

I was awed, almost frightened, by the tone in which he spoke, and the look of his face, on which the shadow of death was falling fast. He lay in a sort of stupor, gazing with his black eyes at the broken roof as if through it he saw something invisible to us.

CHAPTER IV.

It was some time before he seemed to recollect that we were there, and before I ventured to ask him, "Where did you get your plant?"

He smiled. "That's a long story, Master; but it was this way. You see, my father died quite young, in a decline, and left my mother to struggle on with eight of us as she could. She buried six, one after another; and then she died herself, and brother Ben and I were left alone. But we were mighty fond of one another, and got on very well. I got plenty of employment, weaving mats and baskets for a shop in the town; and Ben worked at the factory. One Saturday night he came home all in a glow, and said there was going to be a cheap trip on the Monday into the country. It was the first there had been from these parts,

though there have been many since, I believe. Neither he nor I had ever been out of the town, and he was full of it that we must go. He had brought his Saturday's wages with him, and we would work hard afterwards. Well, you see, the landlord had been there that day, and he had said he must have the rent by Tuesday, or he'd turn us out. I'd got some of it laid by, and was looking to Ben's wages to make it up. But I couldn't bear to see his face pining for a bit of fresh air, and so I thought I could stay at home and work on Monday for what would make up the rent, and he need never know. So I pretended that I didn't want to go, and couldn't be bothered with the fuss; and at last I set him off on Monday without me.

"It was late at night when he came back like one wild. He'd got flowers in his hat, and flowers in all his button-holes; he'd got his handkerchief filled

with hay and was carrying something under his coat. He began laughing and crying, and 'Eh Bill!' he said, 'thou hast been a fool. Thou hast missed a great deal. But I've brought thee a bit of green, lad, I've brought thee a bit of green.' And then he lifted up his coat, and there was the plant, which some woman had given him! We didn't sleep much that night. He spread the hay over the bed for me to lay my face on, and see how the fields smelt, and then he began and told me all about it; and after that when I was tired with work, or on a Sunday afternoon, I used to say, 'Now, Ben, tell us a bit about the country.' And he liked nothing better. He used to say that I should go, if he carried me on his back; but the Lord did not see fit. He took cold at work, and went off, three months afterwards. It was singular,—the morning he died, he called me to him, and said, 'Bill, I've been dreaming

about that trip, that thou didst want to go after all; I dreamt—' And then he stopped and said no more; but after a bit he opened his eyes wide, and pulled me to him, and he said, 'Bill, my lad, there's such flowers in Heaven,—such flowers!' And so the Lord took him. But I kept the bit of green for his sake."

Here followed another fit of coughing, which brought my father from the end of the bed to forbid his talking any more.

"I have got to see another patient in the yard," he said, "and I will leave my son here. He shall read you a chapter or two till I come back; he is a good reader for his age."

And so my father went. I was, as he said, a good reader for my age; but I felt very nervous when the sick man drew a Bible from his side, and put it in my hands. I wondered what I should read; but it was soon settled by his asking for certain psalms, which I read as

clearly and distinctly as I could. At first I was rather disturbed by his occasional remarks, and a few murmured amens; but I soon got used to it. He joined devoutly in the "Glory be to the Father,"—with which I concluded, and then asked for a chapter from the Revelation of St. John. I was more at ease now, and read my best, with a happy sense of being useful; whilst he lay in the sunshine, folding the sheet with his bony fingers, with his eyes fixed on the beloved "bit of green," and drinking in the words of life with dying ears.

"Blessed are they that dwell in the Heavenly Jerusalem, where there is no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God does lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."

CONCLUSION.

By the time my father returned, the sick man and I were fast friends; and I left him with his blessings on my head. As we went home, my good, kind father told me that I was nearly old enough now to take an interest in his concerns, and began to talk of his patients, and of the poverty and destitution of some parts of the town. Then he spoke of the bad state of trade—that it was expected to be worse, and that the want of work and consequent misery this year would probably be very great. Finally he added that when so many were likely to be starving, he had thought it right that we should deny ourselves our little annual treat, and so save the money to enable us to take our part in relieving the distressed.

“Don’t you think so, my boy?” he

concluded, as we reached the door of our comfortable (how comfortable!) home.

My whole heart was in my "Yes."

It is a happy moment for a son when his father first confides in him. It is a happy moment for a father when his son first learns to appreciate some of the labour of his life, and henceforth to obey his commands, not with a blind obedience, but in the sympathizing spirit of the "perfect love" which "casts out fear." My heart was too full to thank him then for his wise forbearance, and wiser confidence; but when after some months my sister's health made change of air to the house of a country relative necessary, great was my pride and thankfulness that I was well enough to remain at the post of duty by my father's side.

One day, not long after our visit to William, he went again to see him; and when he came back, I saw by the musk plant in his hand the news he brought.

Its flowers were lovelier than ever, but its master was transplanted into a heavenly garden, and he had left it to me!

Mortal man does not learn any virtue in one lesson; and I have only too often in my life been ungrateful both to God and man. But the memory of lame William has often come across me when I have been tempted to grumble about small troubles; and has given me a little help (not to be despised) in striving after the grace of thankfulness, even for a "bit of green."

To thy pastures green and fair,
Saviour, let a child repair ;
I will never stray from thee,
But thy fold my home shall be.

Like a gentle lamb, I'll stay
In the meadows fresh and gay ;
Peaceful and contented there,
Guarded by my Shepherd's care.

By the waters still and clear,
I shall wander without fear ;
Happy by my Shepherd's side,
All my wants shall be supplied.

Lord, wilt thou my Shepherd be ?
Help me then to follow thee ;
At thy feet myself I cast,
Thee to serve while life shall last.

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